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TUKARAM

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The Bhakti Movement is perhaps the most glorious creative surge of the Indian mind in this millennium. Tukaram (1608-1650) epitomizes the liberal Hindu tradition of Bhakti in Maharashtra. He is something of a legend. Born as a *Shudra*, persecuted by the orthodox on account of the growing popularity of his rebellious social thinking, Tukaram, after his mysterious end, became the most revered figure of his times. For over three centuries now he has exerted profound influence over the cultural life of the Marathi people. In almost every generation his lyrics have been most widely sung, read and quoted as proverbs. The secret of his tremendous appeal lies in the intensely personal religion reflected in his lyrics. His morality is more relevant to our time than ever. No serious student of world literature can avoid Tukaram.

With the penetrating study of Tukaram's social background and his life and experience revealed in his work, profusely quoted in translation for the non-Marathi audience, this monograph by Bhalchandra Nemade would be valuable for students of literature and literary culture. Nemade is well-known Marathi writer who teaches English literature and Linguistics in Marathwada University, Aurangabad. He runs a small publishing house exclusively for poetry.

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TUKARAM

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

TUKARAM

by

Bhalchandra Nemade



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INTRODUCTION

MARATHI literature attained maturity in prose and verse in the thirteenth century, about five centuries after Marathi had attained the form of a modern Indian language. The major impulse of early Marathi writers was religious and social reformation. Chakradhar, Mahimbhatta, Namadev, Dhnyanadev, Janabai, Muktabai—all created the idiom of literary Marathi so as to make it a rival medium to Sanskrit. Then after a lull of two and a half centuries, the Bhakti tradition was revived by Ekanath; and soon after him, Tukaram turned it into a most dominant force in the life of the Marathi-speaking people.

While familiarizing ourselves with Tukaram, it is good to remember that ours is the age of science and politics, newspapers and entertainments, individualism and slogans; the pleasures of human life are always overrated and literature is not linked with creative social work. To the modern reader who is unfamiliar with the religious and spiritual dimensions of life, the ideas propagated in the Indian heritage might be unacceptable. The emphasis now is on modern science, the objective world of the senses rather than on the inner nature of self, a reality beyond this present empirical world. But the religious point of view, still believed in by the majority in India, considers that mysteries are part of life : Perhaps it is this contrast with Tukaram's age that would bring us close to his life and literature. India is a country where no indigenous culture has been allowed to grow

in its original shape; it is like a stunted tree. Some of its own discoveries such as Bhakti and Yoga have not prospered owing to incessant foreign interference. As V. S. Naipaul realized it rather late, this is a 'wounded civilization.'

Tukaram is well known among the millions of peasants of Maharashtra. Almost all of them know a few sayings or lines from his *abhangs* and many know much more. There are some who commit nearly all his works to memory. He is best loved among the saint-poets of the people of Maharashtra. The literary observers, both foreign and Indian, have noted the tremendous influence of Tukaram on the Marathi-speaking people. We witness even now the long processions of villagers singing Tukaram's songs in Ashadh and Kartik. These processions start from all over Maharashtra and meet at Pandharpur, the holy seat of God Viṭṭhal. This reveals that the religious tradition strengthened by Tukaram and other *Varkari* saints, a tradition of literature and humility and other-worldliness is still a dominant force in the rural India. Villagers use the songs of Tukaram not only as a part of religious *Bhajans* but on occasions to support their practical wisdom. The invariable ending of Tukaram's verses, '*Tuka mhane*' (Tuka says) has become a synonym of indisputable truth. No other poet is so often quoted in the daily life of the people.

It may perhaps be assumed that medieval Marathi literature is a part of still larger whole, or indeed of several bigger wholes of Indian culture. It is certainly a part of Maharashtrian assertion of independence against Muslim invaders, a part of Indian spiritualism and a part of Indian reformation which began with the loss of political freedom. A revolutionary poet like Tukaram has roots in all these areas.

The character of Tukaram's lyrics itself suggests, clearly enough, that they are words intended to be sung. It is worth noting that the entire works of Tukaram were collected from oral tradition, from his distant disciples who committed his lyrics to memory. Illiterate villagers who recite all the five thousand verses of Tukaram by heart are found even today. The passage of three and a half centuries has kept Tukaram as fresh as he

was in his day : colloquial, plain, straightforward, penetrating and classical. It is interesting to probe into the secret of Tukaram's unbroken popularity and respectability.

Normally, saints are revered in an idealistic culture, because they have struck a compromise between the abstract metaphysical aspirations of humanity and the everyday reality. When such a compromise is reflected in their literature, it lives with humanity. People see in such a literature the process of self-realization. Saints like Tukaram satisfy the permanent need of a gadfly. The tormenting conflicts experienced by such saints, when expressed with a magic touch of language, become a source of inspiration to others.

Apart from the unique value of Tukaram as a poet, the people find in him a great interpreter of all types of human situations. There is a solid body of academic opinion which affirms that the saint-poets are idolized on account of their religiosity rather than their true poetic genius. This may be true in cases of forgotten poets who were saints, but it all the more proves that Tukaram lives mainly because of his literary genius.

If we ask ourselves wherein consists the immense superiority of Tukaram's poetry over other literary works of the past from twelfth century onwards (like *Dhnyaneshwari*, *Dasbodh*, Shridhar's works), we shall find that it is the expression of his kindly view of human life—so unlike the want of it in other saint-poets. He has the power to survey the world from a simple and truly human point of view, free from all the high-brow brahmanical grandeur of sanskritized wordage that always keeps the reader some distance away. It is the affection of the lowest caste that he sought in his world-view, which has been contributing to his literary reputation. The affinity to the common man expressed in his proverbial lines, the sorrow of having been born in a low caste, the sensitive inflammation of a lover of equality bring him close to the people.

He never denounced *Samsar*, this workaday existence. On the contrary, he glorified even the common man's living with all its sufferings. All of it is covered in the kindly flow of Bhakti; as he says, '*the whole of Samsar, I will commit to happiness.*'

This perspective has virtually broken the heavy punditized tradition of Marathi literature; and women and low-castes all have found a respectable treatment in his world. The tradition of equality and fraternity was started by the Mahanubhavas, Naths and Chaitanyas and saint-poets like Namadev, Dhnyanadev and Ekanath, along with a host of others from all communities, high and low. A contemporary saint-poetess Bahinabai says, '*Tuka became the steeple of this Varkari tradition.*' The *Varkari* order was established in the thirteenth century and was consolidated by Tukaram and others in the seventeenth century. So many castes including Muslims were accommodated within this *Varkari* fold on an equal footing. It has virtually defeated brahmanism by its large-hearted sympathy. The influence of this order has been so democratic that it has broken down rigid caste distinctions and accorded more respect to women.

Tukaram represents the Bhakti tradition of Marathi saints in a nutshell. As a result, his *abhangs* were regarded as emblems of spiritual attainment by Theosophists, Christians and *Prarthana-Samajists* too in the early twentieth century. The reason given for Tukaram's permanent place in religious thought is that his spiritual experience was genuine and such experience is available to all who are earnest seekers. Tukaram's *abhangs* emphasize the spiritual phases of religion as opposed to its intellectual and philosophical tendencies. A poet, the Rev. N. V. Tilak (1865-1919), a Brahman who embraced Christianity, says :

It was over this bridge built by Tukaram
That I reached the feet of Christ.

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A word to the reader. This book may contain many dubious places particularly for the wholly secularized individuals. The author prays to such readers to seek elsewhere the answers to their doubts as the scope of this book is limited. He earnestly desires that the readers should visualize life as it was in the little village of Dehu in the seventeenth century.

All translation of Tukaram's poetry quoted in this book is mine, and I am quite aware of its inadequacy.

THE BACKGROUND

EVER since the thirteenth century, Maharashtra had seen no political peace and stability. Three centuries of religious intolerance and political intriguing had left lasting memories of past horrors. During Tukaram's lifetime (1608-1650) the whole of Deccan was in great turmoil. This was the period that led the Marathas to a desperate attempt to assert their identity, and with Shivaji, lay the foundation of the tiny Hindu Kingdom, which flourished later. Vijayanagar, the only Hindu Kingdom in the South was lost to the Bahamanids in 1565. In the North the octopus of Moghul empire was advancing towards the South. In the South, the dynasty of the Bahamanids (Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Golconda, Bidar and Berar) was putting up a brave defence against the advance of the Moghuls. The five dominions of the Bahamanids also fought among themselves as with the Moghuls. Ceaseless wars in Deccan between the Moghuls and Ahmednagar had ravaged the country round Tukaram's village.

By the time Tukaram was born in 1608, the whole of the North upto the river Tapi was under the Moghuls; and Bidar and Berar were already annexed to the Moghul empire. Jehangir and Shah Jahan conquered the Ahmednagar Kingdom in 1636, which destroyed all the peace in the north of Maharashtra. The advance of Moghuls in the South was then checked only by Bijapur and Golkonda; and the arena was the south of Maharashtra. After the destruction of Ahmednagar the Moghuls and

Bijapur divided the kingdom, and the area round Pune where Tukaram was born, i. e. the area between the Bhima and Nira rivers, fell to the share of Bijapur kings.

In the South, the Maratha feudal lords were the main source of strength for the Muslim kingdoms. They had succeeded in taming the violence of the outsiders, so much so that their language was the court language, the revenue management was entirely in their hands, though the whole of Maharashtra was under the dominion of Muslim powers.

Golconda and Bijapur proved more than a match for the Moghuls; but ultimately Golconda fell at the assault of the Moghuls, consenting to pay tribute to Shah Jahan; and Bijapur was left to be the only target of the Moghuls. Even after Shivaji's rule beginning in 1646, the area continued to be the arena of warfare between the Marathas and Bijapur, Bijapur and the Moghuls, and the Marathas and Moghuls. Again, the Moghuls were *Sunnis* and the Southern kingdoms were *Shias.* Thus within the political sphere it was a war of religious sectarianism as well.

Constant display of brute force brought about a complete collapse of economy in the Maratha Country. Frequent battles all along the borders encouraged martial spirit even in the otherwise peaceful agricultural communities. The fanatical Muslim powers had reduced the Hindu population to social impotence leading to a total submission to all kinds of authoritarianism.

It is no wonder that in such a great disorder caused by the political confusion of the wars, no great literature flourished in Maharashtra after the thirteenth century. The fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the barren period for Marathi literature, and excepting one major poet, Ekanath (1548-1599), the three hundred years did not produce any significant writer.

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It is in such inhuman conditions that saints like Tukaram had to live, survive and build their empire of God. The revival of religious spirit among the Hindus had a political context, too. Violence could not become a principle in itself; and even

Shivaji, whose reputation of religious tolerance sprang from this source of religious revival, never resorted to violence as an end in itself. He represented the new aspirations of this religious awakening in an intensified form in his own person. Tukaram and others have had an indirect influence on India's modern renaissance with its social and political changes. It was the time when Shivaji emerged on the scene, and Western India was under the control of Mohamedans, who were looked upon as foreigners and destroyers. The saints' teachings helped to effect a religious revival among the peasants and awaken in them greater pride in their ancestral religion. Slowly a pan-Hindu movement developed in the re-assertion of India for Indians, in which these poets had their legitimate place. And the fact that they played an immensely creative role in the evolution of the Marathi language cannot be denied.

Even under hostile influences, the ancient social institutions managed to survive. M. G. Ranade writes, "....among these institutions the system of village communities is most characteristic, and has been developed to a point which has enabled it to survive all foreign interference that has proved so fatal elsewhere. The village community with the Panchayat system has been maintained upto the present day in a manner to subserve the highest aims of Government. ... The tenure of land (in Maharashtra) is ... of more equal and almost democratic character than in other parts of the country. Owing to these peculiarities the people have retained habits of mutual helpfulness and independence which have stood them to good account in past times." About the effect of the caste system on social structure, M. G. Ranade says,[1] "If not blended together, [the subdivisions of castes] show tolerance of a sort amounting almost to indifference, which is characteristic of the country. The Brahmans and the non-brahman Shudras are brought into contact on more equal terms than elsewhere. ...the fact is that the so-called Shudras have, under the influence of the Vaishnav saints, emancipated themselves from the low social positions assigned to them in the old writings, and have risen to be either

1. *Rise of the Maratha Power*, Chapter II

shatriyas or Vaishyas, according as they followed the professions of war or of peace. The Shudras and even the Pariahs — Mahars — have produced saints and poets whose names are revered by the whole country, Brahmans included. Even the Mohamedans lose their bigoted character under these same moderating influences. The Hindus make common cause with the Mohamedans in their great festivals, and this feeling is reciprocated by the Musalmans, except where influences from North India intervene. Some Mohamedan fakirs have been ranked with the Hindu saints in general veneration and there are some saints who are venerated by both communities alike. These features of tolerance and moderation have been developed in the course of centuries and they constitute some of the most stable elements of the national character ..."

The four-fold order of society which had scriptural sanction was impervious to any change whatsoever. Even the alien Muslim rulers respected the social customs and taboos of the various castes and accepted the overtly rigid hierarchy of the Hindu population. They adopted a judicial code based on the social and religious norms of the Hindus. The Hindus were bound by social restrictions stipulated by the sacred texts. This explains why a considerable body of Tukaram's works contains a criticism of the rigidity and evils of the caste system. Learning was confined to Brahmans alone, who were in turn subjected to political slavery and hostile religion of alien rulers.

Loss of freedom leads to loss of self-corrective social system and to stagnation of social institutions. The caste system thus served as an instrument of social disintegration. The saint-poets of the period correctly diagnosed this cancerous nature of the caste system and resolved to destroy the evils of this system within the fold of their religious order, to begin with.

The struggle for independence was felt not only in the political sphere but in the religious field as well. Just about the time of the rise of the Maratha power, a galaxy of saints and prophets appeared on the social scene. They hailed from all the castes and classes, high and low. They included Marathas (*kunbis*), tailors, gardeners, potters, goldsmiths, repentant prostitutes, slave girls

and the outcastes. This religious upheaval indicates plainly that the influence of higher spirituality was not confined to any one class, but permeated deep through all strata of society, male and female, literate and illiterate, Hindu and Mohamedan alike. These are unique features of the reformation in India indicated by such examples as Nanak, Chaitanya, Ramanand, Kabir, Narsi Mehta, Chandidas, Jayadev, Vidyapati, Tulsidas, Surdas, Meera, Dhnyanadev, Namadev, Janabai, Chokha Mela, Ravidas, Purandardas, Ekanath, Sawata Mali, Narhari, Gora, Sena and Tukaram. Enlightened souls from all communities were committed to bring about a country-wide awakening, by means of a revolutionary spirit of brotherhood and monotheism.[2]

The Bhakti cult, which has its origin in the deep South, spread rapidly all over India during the fourteenth century, absorbing various regional varieties of worship. It can be compared with the Protestant movement that condemned the classical Latin, embraced the Bible and revolted against popery. The saints in India were unfortunately divided into numerous regions and languages and their unified achievement has never been properly assessed. The Indian saints also denounced the brahmanical thraldom, denounced ritualism and destroyed the *Vedic* monopoly of learned privileged classes. They laid Sanskrit aside and adopted the language of the people. They reduced the importance of excessive idolatry and unified all devotees under the common fold of one God such as Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur. At the time of Tukaram the Aryan, Dravidian and aboriginal primitive Gods created a terrible confusion on the pantheistic-spiritual plane of Hinduism. The saints strongly objected to the worship of these trivial gods. Soon the

2. It is possible that the saints had been deeply influenced by the dynamic principles of Islam, mainly brotherhood and monotheism. It could be a safe conjecture to say that some of the saints might have also come into contact with the roving Christian missionaries, whose impact had already been felt on the Western coast of the country. The fact that Father Stephens, a Jesuit missionary (1549-1619), wrote his *Christa Puraṇa* in Marathi with a complete familiarity with metres, diction and the overall manner of Marathi saint-poetry supports our observation.

cult of Viṭṭhal attracted thousands every year inculcating a new feeling about God in the minds of the Hindus.

The severity of the monotheistic creed of the Mohamedans was distinctly impressed upon the minds of the prophets of Hinduism. This influence was at work with greater effect in Maharashtra when the saints preached to the people to identify Ram with Rahim, and ensure their freedom from the bonds of formal ritualism and caste distinctions. The philosophy of the saints urged upon them to unite in common love of man and have faith in one God. On the one hand this unification itself might have made the intolerant Muslim rulers soft towards the Hindu saints. On the other, several Islamic leaders such as Abul Fazal and Faizi, Akbar and Dara Shuko (the eldest son of Shah Jahan), Kabir, and Sheikh Mahamad in Maharashtra also tried to evolve a national spiritual consciousness. Hindu-Muslim unity is a dream of the saints which is being realized in India and probably nowhere else Muslims are being absorbed in an alien faith.

However, this is not a complete picture. Both religious revival and puritan enthusiasm were at work in the land. The acquisition of national unity on the spiritual plane was made possible by the saints, though on social plane they were not quite successful. The orthodox Hindu with all his resilience still remained dominant. In Maharashtra, this section soon regained power during the Peshwa rule; and in the late eighteenth century had an Indian summer of brahmanical fanaticism. This would prove, historically, that the movement of the saints was in effect a mild protestantism; its achievement on social plane in Maharashtra was : religious enlightenment replaced brute force and checked intolerance.

Tukaram's works reveal that in this period, blind worship was the law and rational thinking was disliked; religious rites and learning of any sort were the monopoly of the Brahmans who perpetuated this heritage in order to protect their social prestige. The whole tradition of Marathi saints (Naths, Mahanubhavs, Gosavis, Varkaris and Dattas) was determined on challenging this exploitation. The inequality in the field of spiritual *Moksha*, and the discrimination shown to women and Shudras had a

religious sanction. Brahmans had a vested interest in perpetuating their orthodox monopolistic rights, which were unquestioned. The same Brahmans felt no regret in serving the alien rulers in the capacity of Diwans, Deshpandes and Kulkarnis. This was followed by other castes who became Deshmukhs and Jahagirdars with full loyalty to Muslim rulers. The whole society breathed in the poisonous atmosphere of inequality and injustice.

The saints vehemently attacked these trends in thought and practice; and in so doing even denounced Karma Marga and Dhnyana Marga, by upholding Bhakti Marga as superior to both. To them Bhakti is not a means but an end, it is higher than Dhnyana and Karma, it is a philosophy of life. A 'new' God such as Viṭṭhal, whose origin is dubious, was established as a rival God to suppress the existing pantheon. Saints like Tukaram even ridiculed the whole pantheon so as to elevate the status of one God, Viṭṭhal. This revolt was to a large extent complete as Viṭṭhal became the most widely worshipped God of the Marathi-speaking people; people of all classes, both men and women, on equal terms were drawn to Pandharpur.

The Bhakti cult of the *Varkaris* was people-oriented. It created a new ethics of universal God, purity, generosity, fearlessness and inward peace. Literally, the term *Varkari* means 'a time keeper'; it implies a rigorous practice of going on periodic pilgrimages to Pandharpur, Dehu (Tukaram's birth-place) and Aḷandi (Dhnyanadev's birth-place). A *Varkari* observes such prohibitions as keeping away from wine and flesh, wearing a necklace of Tulsi beads, fasting, condemning all types of sins and doing good to others. The democratizing influence of the *Varkari* cult with its disregard for caste distinctions and simplicity in social behaviour provided a valuable counterpoise to Brahman domineering. In a natural way this movement of *Varkaris* served the people to withdraw themselves from too much of active worldly life.

They embraced *advaita* as a matter of course without going into the stale dialectics of *dvaita* and *advaita*. The Absolute is above any attributes, above *dvaita* and *advaita*. The oneness with the universal God whether Shiv or Vishnu or any other,

would gradually result in falling off of the bond of materiality and then the revelation of the Absolute would follow. The spirit of the whole universe flowing in the body is the stage that a *Varkari* saint would aspire for. At the same time there is no reason to abandon society and go to forest. The *Varkari* saints did not extricate themselves from worldly life. They refused to go into another cage in order to escape the one in which man is forced to be born and live. Tukaram says, "*That the world is Maya is a half-truth, as it so appears to the human intellect.*" Thus, the saints in Maharashtra brought in a unique reconciliation of worldly and spiritual life.

The founders of the tradition were Namadev and Dhnyanadev in the thirteenth century. They brought in people of all castes and built a powerful organisation round the cult of Vitthal. They were influenced by Buddhist and Jainist philosophies and had absorbed the major disciplines of Indian philosophy including Shankara's *Mayavad.* The basic ideas of the *vedic* tradition such as the Karma theory, rebirth, Moksha and *Chaturvarnya* were not completely discarded by the saints. But they introduced a fresh and radical interpretation of these ideas in their works. Their literature, which put forward these new ideas, was produced with a direct appeal to the lowest of the lowly castes. Their philosophy successfully demolished the sole prestige of Sanskrit learning. The process of finding a solution to the riddle of Sanskrit was begun in the thirteenth century with Dhnyanadev and was complete with Tukaram in the seventeenth century.

The *Varkari* saints gave a status to Marathi by making it a medium of both literary and religious activities. Saints like Namadev popularized the new ideas in the form of singing and preaching aloud in gatherings of villagers, educating the proletariat in their own language, exposing the orthodoxy and advocating simplification of religious ceremonies. They exhorted their listeners to pity, forgiveness, peace, tolerance, generosity, charity and such other ethical values. A *kirtan* thus became a most effective instrument of religious and political awakening throughout the later centuries. The *Varkaris* particularly discouraged *Sanyasavad* and similar escapist tendencies, and encouraged aggressive

militancy in thought and deed. An extremist example of this trend is Ramdas, who celebrated the high destiny of the Maratha Kingdom and its function of unifying the Hindu world.

It is wrong to view the *Varkari* movement as a religious movement only, because the major concerns of its leaders were to uproot the spreading social evils. They recommended a code of conduct useful for earthy life as well as for spiritual life. They unitedly created an atmosphere in which races, communities, castes, *varnas,* sects, religious bigotism — all dissolved into one social entity. They advocated social equality and brotherhood; and strove hard to destroy discrimination, classification, hypocrisy, lethargy and meaningless ritualism of the Brahmans. The achievement of the saints is all the more remarkable as they had to work in a time when the course of life was pre-determined by the decadent Hindu view of life, and there was no possibility of any freedom from it. People were convinced that even with any amount of hard work, their poverty and starvation, misery and sufferings would not end. For generations the belief persisted that neither morality nor philosophy nor art can be made into substitutes for religion.

Born in such an age and working in such a tradition, Tukaram, under the direction of the heavenly wisdom, made right conduct and right thinking, philosophy and art as substitutes for religion. He suggested purification of the inner spirit in contrast with the outer form. He became the most revered figure of his time. That a Shudra should have been accepted as a religious guide in the face of Brahman pretentions helps to explain his sustained self-struggle during the entire course of his life.

LIFE

THE traditional accounts of Tukaram are so mixed up with legends that it is by no means easy to disentangle from them the authentic information regarding his life. The main source of Tukaram's life is the *Bhakta-Leelamrit* (Lives of Saints) by Mahipati Tahrabadkar written in 1774, about 125 years after Tukaram's *disappearance.* This is the most circumstantial biography of Tukaram. It represents him as a typical saint. A passage of 125 years gives ample time for legends to grow round an honoured name, and Mahipati does not give the slightest hint in his voluminous work as to the sources of his information regarding Tukaram's life. Probably it was based on materials collected by other anonymous writers. Many details in Mahipati's *Life* of Tukaram are doubtful and irrelevant as they spring from too much religious adulation.

Another important source of Tukaram's life is his own *abhangs,* some of which contain many allusions to the events of his life and tell us both of his inward struggles and his outward difficulties. Some *abhangs* correspond with Mahipati's account, but there are uncertainties connected with the text of Tukaram's *abhangs* too, as no authentic version of his works is available. The *abhangs* were composed from time to time as occasions suggested them and they reflect Tukaram's circumstances and the feelings and thoughts at the moment. We cannot be absolutely sure of the genuineness of any particular verse which is ascribed to Tukaram.

Nor do we find the order in which the *abhangs* were composed. However, since Tukaram's poetry is particularly intuitional, one can see his entire spiritual autobiography in his *abhangs*.

Yet another source is the life of Tukaram as reflected in the poems of Bahinabai, a contemporary poetess, who was an eye-witness to the last years of his life. Besides, there are several references in the works of other contemporary poets to Tukaram's spiritual leadership in his age. All these poets have little to say about his formative period and scant attention is paid to his childhood years.

A modern biographer V. S. Bendre has reconstructed Tukaram's life with great scholarship and insight by avoiding the usual infatuation for fanciful and imaginary legends. However, the entire lore of legends concerning Tukaram cannot be set aside while searching for the definitive source of the great man's life; because in spite of their being far-fetched and unrealistic, they are indicative of his magnificent stature.

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It is commonly held by modern research that Tukaram was born in the year 1608 in a small village called Dehu near Pune, situated on the banks of the Indrayani river. His family was a respectable one and for over seven generations they were given a grant (*inam*) of 15 acres of irrigated land close to the ancestral house. There was a temple of Viṭṭhal in the ancestral farm. They also ran a grocer's shop, probably on weekly bazaar days only; and did a bit of money-lending in the little village.

His father Bolhoba and mother Kankai had three sons and two daughters, Tukaram being the second child. Tukaram calls himself a Shudra *kunbi* (agriculturist). According to the seventeenth century brahmanical hierarchy, all non-brahmans were called Shudras. (The present day term *Maratha* with all its different castes and subcastes has evolved a pan-Maharashtrian political identity.) The family name of Tukaram was Morè, a Maratha clan name. Tukaram's ancestors belonged to the Gosavi sect. The Gosavis were the householders who believed in a higher religious order above Hindu caste exclusiveness. Though they

were Gosavis, his forefathers for seven generations were the devotees of Viṭṭhal, thus linking Tukaram's family with the great heritage of *Varkari* Cult of Namadev, Dhnyanadev and Ekanath. He must have read the *Varkari* literature in his boyhood. Being in the family of the Gosavis, he must have also read the essential Sanskrit books like the Geeta and Bhagwat.

Tukaram's poems reflect that he had received a full love of his parents and that the economic condition of the family was fairly good. As a child he would have tended the cattle and looked after the family farm as village children are expected to do. The typical village life with its religious and social customs exerted an important formative influence on his character. The traditional knowledge of the Hindu way of life contributed to the development of his philosophic and poetic interests. The beautiful river Indrayani, the loving relations in the joint family, the picturesque countryside and the wild life of a village boy left a deep impression upon his mind. The complete familiarity with village games frequently referred to in his *abhangs*, several incidents drawn from common life, scurrility, obstinacy, love of the country and of the land, knowledge of trades, farming and religious rites, observation of nature — all are fused in his poetry.

Both his parents died when Tukaram was hardly seventeen. He had been married at an early age to Rukma and had a son by her, but she was asthmatic; soon therefore, he married Jijabai, his second wife. His elder brother Saoji was of spiritual type practising the Gosavi rites; and when his wife died, he became a religious mendicant never to return home. Thus a series of calamities cut short the happy phase of his life and the burden of the family fell on his shoulders. As the only breadwinner of the large joint family he did carry out the responsibilities of agriculture, the small trade and money-lending at a very premature age. But his heart was not in business; naturally, he failed in it. There are stories of rogues deceiving him frequently causing him financial losses, which his wife Jijabai very much resented. Thus up to the year 1629 Tukaram somehow carried on his duties as a farmer and common villager and things were still

going on smoothly. Then about the year 1629, there were terrible happenings, which destroyed Tukaram's peace for ever.

South of Narmaḍa in the west and south, there occurred terrible drought. The whole of Deccan was parched in the hot sun and there were no rains for two years. Rivers dried, food disappeared. In those days when means of transport were scarce, movement of food grains was unthinkable. The land round Tukaram's village on the borders of both Bijapur and the Moghul dominions had been already reduced to a wilderness because of ravaging armies. Most of the villages had disappeared and there were few fields left under cultivation and fewer men to cultivate them. Following the ravages of armies had come this famine, one of the most terrible that Western India had yet experienced. And as men declined in numbers, the wild beasts increased. Wolves became an intolerable danger. They invaded villages in packs and starving peasants were helpless against them.

This was followed by the epidemic of cholera. Contemporary historians like Abdul Hameed Lahiri, Mirza Amin and Quzwini, who eye-witnessed this famine, describe it with great horror. Thousands of people died of starvation. The descriptions of these heart-rending sufferings of people convince us that unspeakable distress prevailed everywhere. Pestilence which followed in the wake of famine raged with such fury that entire villages became desolate, streets glutted with human corpses and highways were so strewn with filth that they became impassable. Abdul Hamid Lahiri even records that the destitution at length reached such a pitch that men began to devour each other and the flesh of a son was preferred to his love. These lands which had been famous for fertility and plenty now retained no trace of productiveness. Peter Mundy, the European traveller who happened to be in the Deccan in November, 1630, describes the same horrors of this calamitous visitation.

One can imagine the plight of a well-to-do and sensitive young man like Tukaram in this fearful period. He recorded, "*God! Humanity itself has vanished.*" He said, "*I can not bear seeing it, such is this wailing. My heart grieves at their sufferings.*" His farming came to an end. His business stopped. His cattle

died of starvation. He faced the crisis of his life. At thirteen, he had entered business; at seventeen, his parents had died; and soon his elder brother's wife died as a consequence of which the brother became mendicant; and now, at the age of twenty-one, he found himself bankrupt. He had no face to show to people owing to his bankruptcy.

His father-in-law came to his help and lent him some money to pull on, but even that was lost again. He had to support a large family and the sight of crying babies and pale faces must have destroyed his faith in the very concept of life. It is in this period that his first wife Rukma died of starvation, crying on her death-bed, "food ! food !" as Tukaram recorded later on, repentantly. His eldest son, Santu, also died soon.

Tukaram was too sensitive a man to take this devastation philosophically. In just four years, he saw several deaths in the family; and bankruptcy, poverty, dishonour and humiliation destroyed his sense of security for ever.

*** *** ***

The famine ended and things were to become normal. Forced at first by hard necessity, he carried on his responsibilities, though all earthly things meant nothing to him. This was a period of adjustment to his complete indifference to surroundings. He worked hard in trade and farming. There are stories of how rogues found him an easy victim. Sickened of his family responsibilities, he was increasingly absorbed in contemplation and neglected his business. The sense of being imperfect and a conviction of sin brought on by his rigid introspection lay heavily on his mind. He was trying to balance both practice and temper. The lyrics expressing the agonies he faced during this period constitute the best of his works. He says :

I am scorched by the fire of Samsar,
While serving this household;
And therefore remember your feet, God,
Come to me, my mother.

In his own birth place, he felt :

This is not my country,
By chance have I come to wander here;
What can I claim as mine ?
... I am a stranger here...

He learnt to look back upon his life with equanimity, as he states in several of his *abhangs :*

Well done, O God, I became bankrupt,
Well done, this famine has tormented me;
Repentance retained the meditation of you,
And the very life has become vomit.

Well done, O God, the wife is a shrew,
Well done, this distress in the eyes of the people;
Well done, I am dishonoured in the world,
Well done, I have lost all my wealth and cattle.

Well done, I care not for public shame,
Well done, I have surrendered myself to you, O God;
Well done, I built a temple to you,
And neglected my children and wife.

Tuka says this vow of Ekadashi is good,
I could keep awake all the night due to empty stomach.[3]

*** ***

3. बरे झाले देवा निघाले दिवाळे ।
बरी या दुष्काळे पीडा केली ॥
अनुतापे तुझे राहिले चिंतन ।
झाला हा वमन संवसार ॥
बरे झाले देवा बाईल कर्कशा ।
बरी हे दुर्दशा जनामध्ये ॥
बरे झाले जगी पावलो अपमान ।
बरे गेले धन ढोरे गुरे ॥
बरे झाले नाही धरिली लोकलाज ।
बरा आलो तुज शरण देवा ॥
बरे झाले तुझे केले देवाइल ।
लेकरे बाईल उपेक्षिली ॥
तुका म्हणे बरे व्रत एकादशी ।
केले उपवासी जागरण ॥

I cut off myself from wife, children and brothers,
And of course became a stupid, unfortunate wretch;
I could not show my face to the people, thus
I began to take recourse to the woods,
Hence this solitude became dear to me.

*** ***

Let people be as they are,
My only concern with them is to say good-bye as I see them;
Who will find time to spend with them ?
They are caught up in all sorts of funny activities.
Tuka says, suddenly I have come out of the affairs of life.

*** ***

Born as a Shudra by caste, I observed all that came to my lot,
I worshipped this God Vitthal, who has been worshipped in my family from the beginning;
I was deeply aggrieved in the affairs of life, as my mother and father ended their course;
The famine drained away my wealth,
My wife died, crying 'food, food' on her death-bed;
I was ashamed and was tormented by this grief, as I was losing in my business.

The temple of Vitthal was in ruins, I felt I should build it,
At first I did kirtan only on the Ekadashi day;
But, then my mind was not set in practice,
So I learned by heart, in full faith and with full respect;
Some sayings of the saints,
I sang only the refrains in the kirtan, with pure heart and devotion;
I tasted the holy water on the feet of the saints,
And suffered no shame to creep into my mind,

I did a bit of good to others, whenever I could,
Not minding any physical hardships ;

I paid no heed to what my friends advised,
I became heartily sick of the world;
I made my own mind testify to truth and untruth,
Never cared for the opinion of majority.

I relied only upon the instructions my Guru gave me in a dream,
After this I was encouraged to compose poetry;
Which I did with full faith in Vitthal.
Then fell the blow of injunction, I was forbidden to write;
Thus for a while my spirit was grieved,
My poems were sunk in the river, and I sat fasting at the door of God,
And He ultimately consoled me.

It will be too long a story, so I will be brief:
Now I see the plan as it is,
What will occur in future, God knows;
It is certain that He shall never neglect his Bhakta,
He is very kind, I have experienced that.

Tuka says, this is the capital of my life,
I speak out what Vitthal bids me speak.

*** ***

My wife died and I was set free,
And God released me from illusion.
It is well that my son died,
And God released me from affection.
Mother died, with her eyes upon me,
And, Tuka says, my anxiety disappeared.

Tukaram's feelings of renunciation can be attributed to several factors, though the famine seems to be the immediate cause of it. The deteriorating social conditions under the alien rulers, the inequality in all fields he witnessed around him, the heart-rending poverty in the society, the deaths in the family, particularly of

his wife and son—all accumulated into a powerful force to create storm in his sensitive mind; and he did not know the reasons of the restlessness of his heart. He says :

> *By whose guidance should I think,*
> *Who will assure my heart?*

And :

> *To censure this world has come to my lot,*
> *The fruit, as it was meant to be mine,*
> *I received; all others were rejected;*
> *The mind does not agree with others' opinion;*
> *Tuka has become a loafer, ridiculed by children and wives.*[4]

He began to see the seeds of restlessness within him. He realized that love of his dear ones and property is not lasting. His parched mind needed faith. This other-worldliness which is so natural to an Indian mind began to overtake him. The religious tradition in his family, the Gosavi cult and his elder brother's quest for eternal happiness had already filled his mind. He writes about his brother :

> *You brought upon us this spirit of mischief, this display of your divine power;*
> *Why did you utterly destroy our family ?*

Teachings of sacred books had pressed on his mind the futility of life; and it was most terribly demonstrated during the famine period.

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4. निंदावे हे जग ऐसा भागा आला भाग ।
होते तैसे आले फळ गेले निवडूनी सकळ ॥
दुसऱ्याच्या मता मिळेनासे झाले चित्ता ।
तुका झाला सांडा विटंविती पोरे रांडा ॥

Meditation is a natural appetite of such a soul and he must seek a quiet place at the first instance. So he left for Bhamnath, a quiet place on the hills which would give him relief. Here he spent days in meditation. He describes this stay :

Trees and creepers and beasts have become my kins,
And the birds too sing in their sweet voice,
Due to this pleasure, this stay of solitude has become dear to me;
No qualities, good or bad affect the body;
The canopy of heavens and the throne of the earth,
I would move wherever the mind loves to;

....

Tuka says, here occurs the dialogue with the mind,
One's own debate with oneself.[5]

This place inspired him to a higher consciousness—and created a desire to see God's spirit. As he describes :

The mind is tortured as if on a hot-plate,
It is blown out by parching like puffed grains.

This state made him feel stranger in the world. He discovered a way during his stay at Bhamnath, but not the final solution. After his return, his worship of Krishna and Viṭṭhal increased;

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5. वृक्षवल्ली आम्हा सोयरे वनचरे ।
पक्षीही सुस्वरे आळवीती ॥
येणे सुखे रुचे एकांताचा वास ।
नाही गुण दोष अंगा येत ॥
आकाश मंडप पृथिवी आसन ।
रमे तेथे मन क्रीडा करू ॥
तुका म्हणे होय मनासी संवाद ।
आपुलाचि वाद आपणासी ॥

Bhakti became his sole activity. There are many legends which serve to illustrate his utter indifference to bodily needs and practical issues. There are stories of his eccentric behaviour regarding domestic and social relations, the most favourite being the naggings of his wife Jija. Tukaram too does not spare her in many of his *abhangs* :

Tuka says, the slut does not like good things,
And runs after my saintly guests like a mad dog.

He never abandoned *Samsar*, not even when he entered the spiritual path. But it was natural that Tukaram had, on occasions, prolonged spells of spiritual preoccupations, which resulted in total negligence of household duties. As a consequence Jija, who was in her teens, had to labour more than a woman of her age was supposed to do. She looked after the household and it must have given her a trying time to maintain the large family, whenever Tukaram was in his strange other-worldly trances. The proverbial image of Jija as a shrew seems to be an exaggeration.

Engrossed in his own pursuits, Tukaram was not aware of the fact that he was initiating any great revolution in the thought of his time. In the period when there were hardly any means of communication, rebellions in social thinking were painfully slow. The voice of revolt hardly reached people beyond a few villages, though the persons who came in contact with the great thinkers carried the message more effectively and with great certainty. Those who were convinced of it by the live contact were invincible couriers of the great thought.

Tukaram seems to have started composing his lyrics after his return from Bhamnath. As he records :

Namadev came in God's company and aroused me in my dream,
He asked me to give myself to composing poetry.

There is evidence to suggest that Tukaram was greatly influenced by the works of *Namadev* and other saint-poets, namely, *Dhnyanadev*, *Kabir* and *Ekanath*.

He was increasingly attracted towards the Geeta; and probably about this time began the translation of the Geeta, which was to create a major crisis soon in his life. It is extremely interesting to know that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Geeta was despised by the orthodox Brahmans for several reasons.[6] It was, among other things, a scripture of revolt against the orthodoxy, who thought that the Vedas were the only scriptures of pure Hindu thought. Also the Geeta was the first of the scriptures to be translated into Marathi by Dhnyanadev and was condsidered to be a challenge to the monopoly of Sanskrit learning. Kacheshwar Brahme, Tukaram's contemporary, while recording the experiences of his childhood, states that he was beaten by his father because he was found reading the Geeta. Yet he 'read the Geeta with devotion *stealthily*,' he records. Finally his father drove him out of home for this 'blasphemy.' There was something in the Geeta which challenged the orthodox Brahmans, and a Marathi version of the Geeta was particularly frowned upon as the Shudras were getting access to the holy learning by such means.

Tukaram was already charmed by the liberal, simplified philosophy of the Geeta. He decided to translate it into Marathi. A fine version of the Geeta was available in the *Dhnyaneshwari*, still Tukaram wanted to have his own interpretation of the Geeta, which would emphasize the *advaita* and Bhakti aspects in the main. The Geeta is a highly dramatized conflict between social and religious obligations : a theme which was closer to Tukaram's basic spiritual concerns. Action uncorrupted by attachment leads to 'freedom' — this was the central teaching of the Geeta that he valued most. He named his translation *Mantra-Geeta*.

It is possible to believe that Tukaram's revolt in thought and preaching was increasingly felt in his own village, as his progress in spiritual attainment continued. The very presence of Tukaram

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6. V. S. Bendre : *Sant Tukaram*, Chapter 7

in his village thus became a sore to the orthodoxy round his village. It was during this period that he was most deeply disturbed. Which is the path to God? Why did his soul find no rest? Was his ancestral Gosavi cult better? Or Krishna and Vitthal worship is better? Lyrics composed by Tukaram on these religious problems constitute another major part of his works.

About 1640, his anxiety came to an end as he was initiated into the Chaitanya cult by one Babaji Chaitanya. He records:

Tuka says, my tie is broken
By the great Guru Babaji.

The spirit of truth was revealed to Tukaram. It is believed, according to one traditional version, that Tukaram spontaneously started composing his lyrics after this initiation.

The Chaitanyas, in the line of Babaji, were a very famous cult. It originated with *Raghav Chaitanya* (15th century), who was revered by both Hindus and Muslims. He originally belonged to Girinar (Saurashtra), then migrated to Maharashtra; and finally to Telangana, which was the major area of his activities. Raghava Chaitanya's shrine is even today visited by Hindus and Muslims around Gulbarga where he is called *Hazrat Ladle Mashayak alias Raghav daraz Aland Sharif*. He was the spiritual Guru of the King of Gulbarga. He was originally influenced by the Mahanubhavas, the *avaidikas* who created a major revolt against orthodox Hinduism in the thirteenth century; but the Chaitanyas soon grew out of their influence. While the Mahanubhavas were above *varnas* within the Hindu fold, the cult of Raghav Chaitanya was above any religion. It was purely a spiritual cult similar to that of Naths and Siddhas.

Raghav Chaitanya's disciple Keshav Chaitanya belonged to Tukaram's region. He lived at a place called Otur near Tukaram's village. Babaji Chaitanya was the follower of Keshav Chaitanya and several poets in the seventeenth century were his disciples. It is said that Babaji disappeared suddenly in a mystic way, and that was his end. Tukaram's end also has a similar mystery, as we shall see.

When Tukaram visited Otur, he was graced by Babaji in a trance. It is likely that he might not have seen Babaji physically and the realization was hypnotic. Tukaram describes his initiation thus :

He placed his hand on my forehead,
And showed the very ecstasy,
He gave me the appearance of ecstasy;
Then the whole fine blue light appeared,
Red, white, yellow, blue and black colours appeared variously;
Colours shed, it entered the colourless,
And pure remained the light of self.[7]

Similar trances are described by other saints when the physical properties appear to have changed their nature and the mind itself is awakened to a higher consciousness. Tukaram confirms :

Tuka says, such was done by Babaji,
That he placed me perennially on his own seat.

It seems that after Tukaram, the Chaitanya cult dried up as he never had direct disciples and he avoided building the organization. He was too subjective to give attention to the purely sectarian activities. Several poets claim to be his disciples, but he is silent about it.

Tukaram's life assumed a different turn after his initiation, about 1640. His militant spirit led him, without his desire, into

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7. चौ देहाचे माथा ठेवूनिया हात ।
उन्मनी साक्षात दाखविली ॥
उन्मनीची मुद्रा चेपोनिया दिली ।
अवघी ती झाली सुनीळ प्रभा ॥
रक्त श्वेत पीत नीळ आणि कृष्ण ।
रंग उमटती नानापरी ॥
रंग टाकोनिया अरंगात गेले ।
निर्मळ राहिले निज तेज ॥

social controversy. In the year 1645 he had to face an ordeal to prove his spiritual authority. His lyrics revealed a very confident tone as for social discrimination and religious authoritarianism; that must have irritated the Brahmans. While his translation of the Geeta and his devotional songs were becoming popular, the Brahmans started emitting their suppressed anger and questioned his activities of preaching in *kirtans* and writing about religious matters.

*** *** ***

Tukaram had been incessantly ridiculing the customs and rituals of the Hindus and their Gods and Goddesses. Most heretics of Hindus had adopted an entirely different code of conduct and even conspicuous uniforms in order to aim at the dissolution of inequality in the way of spiritual attainment. But the *Varkaris* had adopted a more practical way of mildly ridiculing the rural Gods, Brahman orthodoxy and Vedic ritualism. Tukaram's glorification of Viṭṭhal and his anti-traditional preachings in his lyrics obviously posed a threat to the Brahmans. His powerful utterances in verse became increasingly popular. In his concept of religion the paraphernalia such as muttering scriptures, penance, vows, Guru-disciple relationship, charms, spells, ochre robes, donations to Brahmans — all were abandoned. It was so practical a religion that even an ignorant man or woman could embrace it. The singing at *kirtans* with cymbals produced a rhythmic world that made the singers and the listeners forget their physical existence by making the body 'airy'. The *advaita* contents of the verses created the feeling of oneness among all. Tukaram with cymbals in his hands, singing his beautiful lyrics, preaching social equality became a revered figure. His daily *kirtans* in the temple gathered crowds and created an unusual atmosphere round the vicinity of his village. His followers who included Brahmans also increased. His fame spread far and wide and devotees of Viṭṭhal started coming to Dehu to listen to him.

One such devotee was Bahiṇabai, a contemporary poetess, the daughter of a Brahman of Deogaon near Aurangabad. She was married to an orthodox Brahman. The family was at Kolhapur when Bahiṇabai heard the *abhangs* of Tukaram sung at a *kirtan*

by one Jayaramswami.[8] She was so enchanted by Tukaram's songs that she decided to see Tukaram, and, if possible, be his disciple. She records :

Tukaram's advaita poems are so celebrated,
Their meaning made my mind wistfully yearn.

Her devotedness to Tukaram became a matter of suspicion for her jealous husband, and it finally resulted in disturbances in the family. How can a Brahman lady seek guidance from a Shudra Tukaram ? At last, she persuaded her husband to move from Kolhapur to Dehu. She confirms among other things the account of Tukaram's *kirtans :*

Tukoba Gosavi, the Shudra grocer,
Sings Hari-katha all the time in the temple,
Even Brahmans fall at his feet ....

And :

Tukoba's kirtan is the meaning of the Vedas
My heart is fully gratified.[9]

When the hostile Brahmans knew that she regarded Tukaram as her Guru, she was persecuted. One Mambaji, their leader, said angrily to her, "How can a Shudra's mind be endowed with knowledge ?"[10]

The confident and quiet revolt of Tukaram became increasingly intolerable to the orthodox Brahmans as it reduced the importance of Sanskrit learning; and what is more, their earnings dwindled. Bahiṇabai, in her autobiography, confirms several stories regarding the persecution of Tukaram. When she came to

8. Autobiography in *Bahiṇabaicha Gatha*
9. तुकोबाची कथा वेदांतील अर्थ ।
पावे माझे चित्त समाधान ।।
10. शूद्राचिया अंतरा ज्ञान कैचे ?

Dehu, she found accommodation in the house of Mambaji, who did not approve of the purpose of her coming to Dehu. He asked her furiously, "Can a Shudra's mind perceive knowledge ? Can he be a spiritual guide ?" Later he expelled Bahiṇabai along with her family from his house because she attended Tukaram's *kirtans*. She confirms in her autobiography the account of Mambaji's hostility to Tukaram. Bahiṇabai also records that Mambaji and others appealed to the Brahmans of Pune, the religious authorities, to investigate into this sacrilege of 'Brahmans accepting the Guruhood of a Shudra.' His translation of the Geeta seems to have been put forward as a valid point that would easily prove Tukaram's culpability. One Rameshwar Bhatt, a learned Brahman, is believed to have been the leader of this persecution campaign.

Tukaram suffered all this with patience. There are numerous legends to prove that Tukaram's life was made miserable by haughty Brahmans. For example, his cow was beaten to death; even he was beaten for minor offences. Finally, as a punishment he was excommunicated.

A Shudra poet, an outcaste, who continued to speak of the evils of the caste system and against its rigidity in the name of 'God's most pious follower,' still infuriated his enemies. Several of his *abhangs* challenged the authority of his enemies. For example,

Well done, O God, you made me a Kunbi,
Otherwise I would have been doomed by hypocrisy.

*** ***

Had I been learned, it would have brought calamities on me,
I would have been subjected to pride and arrogance,
I would have taken the path of hell ...

*** ***

Tuka says, you go on with your Vedic parrotry,
Don't come in my way.

In some *abhangs* he questioned their very understanding of the scriptures :

> *We alone know the real meaning of the Vedas,*
> *Others only bear the burden of it;*
> *Food eaten is not to be compared with food seen,*
> *It is like a hired servant who merely carries the burden of goods;*
> *The creation, preservation and destruction of life is left to God.*
> *Tuka says, we have found the root,*
> *Of its own the fruit will now come into our hands.*[11]

It is, therefore, natural that Rameshwar Bhatt should have made it a point of prestige to bring Tukaram to prostration. If Tukaram wanted to avoid excommunication, he must undergo an ordeal. Mahipati states that Rameshwar Bhatt ordered Tukaram, "Take the verses you have written and with your own hands sink them in the water of the river."

In the seventeenth century society, a Shudra posing a virtual threat to the authority of Brahmans was unheard of. Other *Varkari* saints like Dhnyanadev and Ekanath had some saving grace of being born as Brahmans, but Tukaram found it impossible to establish his credentials without evoking fury. The Brahmans wanted from the authorities judgement on Tukaram's right to preach new ways of attaining *Moksha*. Finally the village *Patil* was persuaded to file a suit against Tukaram, in effect prohibiting Tukaram's writings.

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11. वेदाचातो अर्थ आम्हासीच ठावा ।
 येरांनिवाहाव भार माथा ॥
 खादल्यांची गोडी देखिल्यासी नाही ।
 भार धन वाही मजुरीचे ॥
 उत्पत्तीपाळणसंहाराचे निज जेणे नेले बीज त्याचे हाती ;
 तुका म्हणे आम्हा सापडले मूळ ।
 आपणाचि फळ आले हाता ॥

Tukaram was shocked at the cruel imposition which deprived him of the treasure of his expression. Without any political support or social status, he found himself helpless. The isolation and fear of being an outcaste and the intensity of social ostracism felt by a sensitive poet in a stray village of the seventeenth century, are unimaginable in our days. All that Tukaram would say to defend himself was that he was commanded by God to compose his songs. He described his own condition :

Whatever little money I had was soon spent up,
Thereafter debt was inevitable,
That too nobody offers.

In another *abhang* he says :

What shall I eat now ? Where shall I go ?
On whose support shall I count and live in the village ?
The Patil is angry, the village folk angry,
Who will bother about me now ?
They say, "The fellow has now given up all sense of decency,"
And drag me to the court.
The respectable people have suggested a move to checkmate me,
And destroyed me, a weak man.
Tuka says, their company is not good for me,
Let me now go seek Vitthal.[12]

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12. काय खावे आता कोणीकडे जावे ।
गावात राहावे कोण्या बळे ।।
कोपला पाटील गावीचे हे लोक ।
आता घाली भीक कोण मज ।
आता येणे चवी सांडिली म्हणती ।
निवाडा करिती दिवाणात ।।
भले लोक याची सांगितली मात ।
केला माझा घात दुर्बळाचा ।।
तुका म्हणे यांचा संग नव्हे भला ।
शोधीत विठ्ठला जाऊ आता ।।

This was a phenomenon very unique in the social history of Maharashtra. Most non-Brahmans had to make a compromise with the brahmanical code. One had either to evoke the displeasure of Brahmans or consciously uphold brahmanism. Even the outcastes like Dhnyanadev had to show conformity to the brahmanical code. But Tukaram was a non-conformist to the core and he refused to comply with the injunction of the authorities. He continued to write. He would rather face an ordeal. "Do what you like," he said with all the humility, "Viṭṭhal will protect me."

The dead end of this crisis is wrapped in a shroud of mystery. Tukaram was forced to throw all his writings into the river; and he went into meditation praying to Viṭṭhal. This incident of water-ordeal took place in 1645 approximately, when Tukaram was thirty-seven.

He became dumb, silent and mustered all his mental courage by fasting for thirteen days, meditating and calling for God's help. As he writes :

Tuka says, this is my desperate effort,
Now I shall drown myself into the Chandrabhaga.

Miraculously enough, after thirteen days his papers floated up on the water. This incident has been recorded by several of his contemporaries. The news of this miracle spread far and wide and his followers acclaimed it as their victory over the persecutors. It gave Tukaram a superhuman image and his verses became holy for generations to come.

*** *** ***

The last phase of his life, revealed by modern research, shows that Tukaram spent his last years in quietude. With a good piece of land close to his village he would have got plenty of leisure and he could have afforded meditation and writing by remaining in the house. He devoted most of his time to spiritual pursuits. People regarded him as an *avatar* as he states :

T ... 3

People call me 'God'. This is the way of the contemptible ...

I know my sins, O God,
Let not my vanity increase with such a praise,
Let not pride alienate me from you,
The sense of greatness will be a burden on my consciousness.

As we know, Tukaram was a very practical man who never went to any extremes. Unlike other saints he never despised women and children and such other domestic responsibilities. People from all walks of life, high and low, became his devotees. He said :

I seek these people because God is in all ...
They are the limbs of the same body,
To discriminate between them is an unholy delusion.

From the *abhangs* he appears to be a man of humility and simplicity, of a peaceable disposition and spirit of kindness. They reflect his sound learning contrary to the popular notion that he was illiterate. He was occasionally short-tempered, bitter, rough and vulgar; but was forgiving, introspective, sensitive and expressive. His growth was like the growth of a tree in its natural environment, from seed to its full stature. He had no status, no sympathetic neighbours, no teacher, no one to guide him in his moral life. No one taught him the art of poetry. Mahipati pictures him helping the sick, conveying burdens of the weary, giving water to the thirsty and food to the hungry. going on errands for the lame. As God became his master, he surrendered all action to God.

He is the most human of saints, true to life, full of human interest. He was totally aloof from the political currents that were sweeping the Deccan at the time. It is worth noting that the contemporary disciples and later biographers of Tukaram seem to exaggerate the co-called 'saintly' qualities of Tukaram with the usual persecution motif in order to satisfy their own concept of a typical Mahatma. Disgust for life, negligence of *Samsar*, indifference to life, *sanyas* and capacity to perform

miracles — are some of the properties that have been attributed to Tukaram by the numerous legends woven round him, the historical authenticity of which is subject to appropriate interpretation.

Contrary to the popular notions, there is no evidence that he went to Pandharpur on a pilgrimage regularly or visited villages preaching his message. Another such myth is the meeting between Shivaji and Tukaram, which, it is said, resulted in Shivaji's desire to abandon his task of building the Maratha kingdom. Most probably they never met. There is a very remote possibility of his meeting Ramdas, the dynamic brahmanical saint. Both Tukaram and Ramdas represent different ways of life, though both believed in social awakening by conscious efforts. Tukaram, however, confined his activities to his own village, whereas Ramdas wanted to raise a pan-Hindu kingdom with the help of growing Maratha nationalism.

With the last years of Tukaram are associated several miracles, which prove his widespread popularity. For example, at Lohgaon a poor woman of bangle-selling caste earnestly wanted to attend Tukaram's *kirtan*. She had a baby that could not be left alone at home; therefore, she gave it a heavy dose of opium so that it would not disturb others in the house at night. It so happened that the dose proved to be fatal and the angry people in the house brought the dead body straight to the *kirtan*. Tukaram restored life to the baby, thus proving the greatness of the mother's devotion to Viṭṭhal. There are stories of Tukaram giving away food and clothes to the needy poor, eventually provoking his nagging wife.

Another legend points out Tukaram's benevolence to creatures. Near the place of his meditation there was a farm under crop of jowar. The owner wanted Tukaram to watch his farm and protect it from the birds by means of a sling. He was promised half a maund of jowar. But Tukaram, thinking that the birds too were God's creatures, children of Viṭṭhal, allowed them to eat away the entire crop and kept himself engaged with God's name. He wrote, "*Have the birds no share in the crop of corn ? Why should I turn them away ?*" When the owner discovered that there was hardly anything left in the field, and claimed the

normal crop of forty maunds by way of compensation, the village council settled this dispute and reaped the field. To everybody's surprise, the crop yielded several hundred maunds of grain. The judges offered the rest of it to Tukaram, who refused it promptly, saying that one should have no claims on the fruit of one's action !

Once when he was passing through a field, birds flew away at his approach. He felt hurt at having frightened them and stood still where he was, praying to God to remove from his body and mind whatever might have scared the innocent creatures. He stayed until birds came back and perched on him as on a tree.

Tukaram's life is exemplary for those who believe that spiritual attainment is possible by performing duties of *Samsar* well. There was ample emphasis on such striving without expectations of fruit in the Geeta. It is by our continual exposure to reality that we overcome our baser self and experience the disappearance of ego. By hard introspection we purify the self. In this manner Tukaram minutely probed into his own past life and with full repentance analysed the nature of his own soul. The feeling of inferiority which tortured him in the early stage disappeared later — and this son of a Shudra, facing all kinds of humiliations at the hands of Brahmans, finally started saying, "*It is only we (Bhaktas) that know the real meaning of the Vedas, others only carry the load of it*". In another *abhang* he says that "*the learned Brahmans will have to become servile to us.*" With a new confidence, he started saying :

I, of low caste, cannot even hear the Vedas,
To such a one, you gave a place in heaven;
Now I am not in any way feeble, dear God,
I am not low by birth or family,
I am not distressed.[13]

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13. यातिहीन नये ऐको जया वेद ।
तया दिले पद वैकुंठीचे ।।
आता मी सर्वथा नव्हे गा दुर्बळ ।
यातिहीन कुळ दैन्यवाणा ।।

For this great transformation, he was grateful to God Viṭṭhal.

Tukaram not only realized God himself but brought God-realization within easy reach of all. His *abhangs* reveal certain states of consciousness in which he obtained direct experience of a spiritual unity underlying the apparent diversity of the universe. Beyond the finite world of time and space he could feel the essence of the Absolute. Poems born of this state of mind would easily claim supreme distinction in the history of classical imagination.

*** *** ***

His *disappearance* in 1650 has become a matter of great controversy. It is believed that he disappeared while singing his poems. The naive as well as the learned believe this mysterious phenomenon which is testified by several of his contemporaries and disciples. A lyric, believed to be composed by Tukaram, describes how he was visited by the chariot of God. A genuine historical test for such miracles is impossible, and if there were one, it would fall in the nexus of mysticism. The theories constructed on the mysteries of Bermuda triangle, Mayan relics, witchcraft, psycho-pathology, white magic and black magic, self-transformation, the flying discs and the huge 'landing slabs' of Baalbek confuse even the most rational mind. The yogis and mystics like Ramkrishna Paramhans, Narsinha Saraswati and Aurobindo have shown how the entire transformation of consciousness can take place. All these facts have opened up the possibility of a new dimension on the edge of which man stands today[14].

Bahiṇabai, Tukaram's contemporary, states :

O Tukaram ! While we were looking at you,
You disappeared in a flash.[15]

The facts concerning Tukaram's end are shrouded in obscurity. Some scholars explain it by imagining that he was drowned in the neighbouring river. Some others conjecture that he went off

14. P. D. Ouspensky : Tertium Organum

15. तुकारामा तंव देखता देखता ।
आले अकस्मात गुप्तरूप ॥

on pilgrimage from which he never intended to return, as such an act was considered to be fitting end for a saint. However, it is worth noting that in the tradition of his gurus, *samadhi* was the most usual end; and it is quite likely that Tukaram also met with a similar end. Several *abhangs* of Tukaram describe the state of his mind before he disappeared. He says :

The living body is like a dead one,
And has been borne on the way to the cemetery;
The pitcher is whirled round and is broken to pieces at the feet,
Passions, the women, are crying all day and night, " Alas ! Death ! Death !"
The dung-fuel of dispassion covers the body,
The fire of Dhnyana has touched the Absolute spirit;
The death-cry of the great Word's boom emerges,
The family, the name and the form have been burnt up,
And the body is delivered to whom it belonged

In another *abhang*, he writes :

I have seen my death with my own eyes,
That was indeed an incomparable festivity;
The three worlds were filled with joy,
I enjoyed it as the Universal soul;
I was confined to the one region bound by egoism,
By renouncing it, plenitude followed,
The obsequies of birth and death are over,
Now I am separated from my own contraction.[16]

16. आपुले मरण पाहिले म्यां डोळां ।
तो झाला सोहळा अनुपम्य ॥
आनंदे दाटली तिन्ही त्रिभुवने ।
सर्वात्मकपणे भोग झाला ॥
एकदेशी होतो अहंकारे आथिला ।
त्याचा त्याग झाला सुकाळ हा ॥
फिटले सुतक जन्ममरणाचे ।
मी माझ्या संकोचे दुरी झालो ॥

There was no anxiety, as he sings,

It was for this that I had toiled frantically,
So that the last day would become sweet;
Now without anguish, I relax,
As the race of desires has come to a halt.[17]

***   ***   ***

Tukaram's posthumous disciples include various circles of poets cutting across caste barriers. There was Bahiṇabai, a Brahman woman; there were Kacheshwar Brahme, Niḷoba, Rameshwar Bhatt Mambaji—all Brahmans; the last two having persecuted him earlier, became his most devout followers. Then there were Shaikh Mahamad, Santaji Teli and Santoba Pawar—all Shudras, who were extremely grateful to him for having liberated them from the orthodoxy. Tukaram soon became a spiritual guide to millions who recited his songs in the villages all over Maharashtra, a position which he has held ever since. His lyrics are most widely known, recited, quoted and sung; and portions of his work are widely copied by devotees; editions and selections, commentaries and discourses, interpretations and acclamations of his *abhangs* have been numerous in old and modern times.

17. याजसाठी केला होता अट्टाहास ।
शेवटचा दीस गोड व्हावा ।।
आता निश्चितीने पावलो विसावा ।
खुंटलिया धावा तृष्णेचिया ।।

TUKARAM AS A POET AND SAINT

TUKARAM'S original manuscripts are not available and there is every reason to believe that most of his *abhangs* were extemporaneous, given spontaneously in the enthusiasm of *kirtans*. It is, therefore, natural that they are frequently contradictory and inconsistent; and it is difficult to reconstruct his system of philosophy. They are a spontaneous development, being the natural outgrowth of his spiritual experiences. They tell of his moods, hopes, disappointments and disillusionment, along with a wide range of practical knowledge.

It is believed that after his death his papers were handed over to several of his disciples, who memorised or duplicated them. In any case, the originals have not been traced. There are several manuscripts which might have been copied from the original source and in turn circulated all over Maharashtra orally or written. Thus there is no authentic text of Tukaram's works written before the end of the seventeenth century. Phonetic and lexical changes, dialectal replacements and even additions may have crept into the original compositions. The result is a confusion of texts and textual problems leading to contradictory responses. His great grandson tried to collect the *abhangs* from various places and sources, both oral and written. This is the first available 'authentic' text of Tukaram's works. The first printed volume of Tukaram's *abhangs* appeared in Bombay in 1867.

No chronological order of his poems is possible, and a subject-wise order gives only his impromptu opinions. It is, therefore, better to treat each *abhang* independently and imagine the situation of his life. His *abhangs* cover a wide range of subjects such as allegorical interpretation of village games, puranic tales illustrating principles of Bhakti, code of ethics, pictures of life around him, incidents relating to his own life, his religious experiences and social criticism. They range all the way from sublime aspirations to trifling matters. Though a saint, Tukaram is more social and philosophical than theological. Again, he is not so much interested in the origin of things as in the facts of life as he found them. Behind the religious veil, we find a very rich tapestry of human concerns. The entire *abhangs* disclose a soul caught up in mystery and pain; and there is an accent on suffering as a means to gain knowledge of reality. Throughout his life, he had refused to be consoled until wisdom dawned upon him, and it is in the name of mankind that he suffered. Thus his poems achieved a form and sensibility which is modern. The spiritual experiences through which he passed are common to all mortals. The social problems he posed are universal. He never carried either attachment to or detachment towards life to extreme. No other Marathi poet before or after him has emphasized the value of this world by still remaining other-worldly.

He was fully conscious of his role as a spiritual guide, thinking it was essential for him as a poet to convince the people that one must discover the basic truths for himself, not just accept them on blind faith. In his poems there is a clear emphasis on personal existence and subjectivity. To him, literature was a part of his faith in life.

As a supreme exponent of Bhakti in Marathi poetry, Tukaram can be observed passing through the evolution of spiritual attainment, though such a study of his *abhangs* must always remain tentative. It is interesting to see how the various stages of this evolution intrinsically correlate with the creative process.

In the beginning there is the self's awakening to God. The love of the world appears to be illusory; it leads men astray calling out their evil passions. The self is cut off from immediate

realities and attachment to earthly objects. Then follows a terrible soul-struggle. The organs are as if recoiled and the entire body system is disturbed. Evil habits disappear. The Bhakta is emancipated from the bonds of desires. Repentance follows. As Tukaram, in his intense restlessness says :

Make me homeless, wealthless, childless,
So that I may remember you.

Again :

There could be no greater sinner than myself.

Elsewhere Tukaram says,

However fearful it is, ...
This samsar cannot be set aside.

Then, a spirit of good-will and kindliness replaces animal instincts. In several hundred *abhangs* Tukaram is found burdened with a conviction of sin brought on by his rigid introspection. He upbraids himself for his numerous sins and shortcomings from a puritanical point of view. "*I am just a heap of sins*", he states. There are confessions of the follies he had committed in the earlier life :

Let my ego be crushed under stones,
Let my name, this adornment, be burnt.

***

***

My mind is agile, knows not repose,
Not for a moment does it remain steady.

This leads to the next stage of purification of self which assumes the art of contemplation and incessant meditation. It is worth noting that the same detachment, disinterestedness and impersonal attitude to self are natural prerequisites of creativity. When non-attachment is complete, Tukaram emerges as a different man with a purified heart and mind :

My speech is non-speech;
Dying, I live;
Existing, I don't exist in the world;
In enjoyment, I renounce;
In association, I dissociate;
Attachment and detachment both I served;

Tuka says, I am not what I appear to be,
Ask Viṭṭhal if you have anything to ask about me.

As a liberated man, he continues a deeper search of the inner reality. He receives a wide range of mental powers that lead him to ecstasy. The search for self brings unusual disturbances; but when successfully completed, it brings unusual peace which, in metaphysical terms, means divine life. Tukaram states :

The pain of affliction is now over,
The burden of it is now on God,
All anxiety is gone, and this conviction has come,
No more coming to life like this.

*** ***

Peace is life's crown,
All other pleasures are only pains.

At this stage, 'interactionism' begins; the mind may cause bodily changes, and bodily changes may produce mental effects. Tukaram is able to see and hear what is beyond the reach of normal human senses. The rapture he feels is seen in the hallucinatory impressions in his poems. His contemporaries have described him dancing and crying while singing his lyrics. The visible world appears to him to be a part of the spiritual universe. There is an inner communion with the Spirit :

Tuka says, here occurs a dialogue with the mind,
One's own debate with oneself.

Spiritual energy flows in, producing strange effects. Tukaram's communion with his God, Viṭṭhal, takes a variety of forms. He is jealous of him, threatens him, loves him, laments like a forlorn

beloved. He surrenders his own self to God, seeks atonement with him, seeks even the agony of separation from him. For example :

I am ashamed of calling myself your servant,
You are cruel and callous
You allow your children to cry with hunger.

*** ***

I shall spoil your good name,
If you continue to be indifferent.

*** ***

To me God is dead,
Let him be for those who think that he is.

*** ***

You are shameless, and have no caste and family,
You are a thief and an adulterer.

*** ***

You have provoked me to a quarrel,
And nobody can now gag my mouth.

*** ***

You are more loving than a mother,
You are cooler than the moon,
You are more yielding than water,
You are a roaring surge of love.[18]

*** ***

I have become wearied, my mother,
And cannot walk any longer,
Lift me up in your kindness and love,
Put me to your breast and satisfy my hunger.

On occasion, he is impatient for God's realization and often plunges into despair. He is frequently frustrated; but all the time God becomes the stimulus of his creativity. He derives

18. तू माउलीहुनी मायाळ चंद्राहुनी शीतळ ।
पाणियाहुनी पातळ कल्लोळ प्रेमाचा ।।

great strength from his contact with God. God is everything, as he mentions in an *abhang* :

Your name is my penance, my religious gifts,
my pilgrimage, propitiation ceremonies,
and chanting of the holy name;
That is my ablution, my observance of the vow, my truth,
Karma, Dharma and ritual;
Your name is my Yoga, my sacrifice, contemplation,
family rites and clan rites;
Your name is my thought and practice and
determination, and everything.
Tuka says, your name contains all these.

In another *abhang, he says* :

When the Ganga meets the ocean,
The gap between them is delusion,
Between you and me it is just the same;

Tuka says, I have shown you,
The seed within seed;
Fruit and flower appear and disappear,
They are mere deception.

His letter to Viṭṭhal is one of the most touching episodes in Bhakti literature. Intoxicated with love, he sings :

Wherever I go you follow me,
You lead me holding my hand;
I want to walk because I lean on you,
You bear my burden all along.

When I gabble, you correct it,
You took my shyness away and made me bold;
All people have become my protectors,
All my kinsmen, all my dear friends.

So, Tuka says, now I play fondly,
Your bliss is spread within and without.[19]

The ultimate stage of this spiritual journey is characterized by cosmic consciousness :

More minute than the atom,
Tuka still equals the sky in vastness;
I swallowed and vomitted the carcass,
The very image of worldly delusion;
I have abandoned the Triad — knowledge, the knower and the knowable,
The light is lit within;
Tuka says, I now remain only to serve others.[20]

*** ***

The God of my soul, whose womb contains infinite universe,
Is in my heart.

*** ***

I gave birth to myself,
And came out of my own womb.

*** ***

The very distinction of dvaita and advaita faded,
Space, time and substance — all vanished;

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19. जेथे जातो तेथे तू माझा सांगाती ।
चालविसी हाती धरूनिया ॥
चालो वाटे आम्ही तुझाचि आधार ।
चालविसी भार सवे माझा ॥
बोलो जाता बरळ करिसी ते नीट ।
नेली लाज धीट केलो देवा ॥
अवघे जन मज झाले लोकपाळ ।
सोइरे सकळ प्राणसखे ॥
तुका म्हणे आता खेळतो कवतुके ।
झाले तुझे सुख अंतर्बाही ॥

20. अणुरेणुया थोकडा तुका आकाशाएवढा ।
गिळुनी सांडिले कलिवर भवभ्रमाचा आकार ॥
सांडिली त्रिपुटी दीप उजळला घटी ।
तुका म्हणे आता उरलो उपकारापुरता ॥

The soul assumed the form of the universe,
The Word never was : only the Absolute is;
'I am that I am' is realized,
'That you are' is proclaimed by Divine bliss.

Tuka has now become all this in his own person.

*** ***

My death is dead, I have been made immortal,
Tuka says, the foundation has been revealed.

Unlike the modern poets who grope for the dimension of time, Tukaram transcends time and plies the imagery of the entire cosmos with great ease. He says : "*My native land is the whole of the universe.*" At no stage does he enter into the chaff of arguments on *dvaita* and *advaita, saguna and nirguna,* the good and the evil and similar intellectual jargon. Religion was a positive belief that provided a strong basis for his poetry. With supreme confidence he would tell his God :

You have nothing that we can beg for,
Although you are afraid of it, O God.[21]

*** ***

False is the laughing, false is the weeping,
The false mounts the false;
False is 'mine' and false is 'thine,'
False is the burden of falseness;
False is the singing, false is the bearing,
Unreality seeks unreality;

Unreal the enjoying one; unreal the renouncing one;
Unreal the ascetic; unreal is Maya.
Unreal is Tuka, unreal his devotion;
Speaking unreal things to unreal listeners.

There is no comparison to this blessedness as truth is revealed to him in the subjective experience of living :

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21. आम्ही मागो ऐसे नाही तुजपाशी ।
जरी तू भीतोसी पांडुरंगा ।।

For sleep, the stone-bed is best,
For covers, the sky is best;
Why hope for anything?
Hope wastes life.[22]

Certain amount of obscurity is obviously felt in a few of his *abhangs;* a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of symbols and metaphors communicates his unique personal feelings :

Wherever I see, I find the pith of the whole sky standing;
The image fixed in the eyes so much, that it was imprinted;
Red, white, black and yellow light shone variously;
The eye-salve of consciousness got into the eyes,
And caused the vision itself to become consciousness;
The dvaita-advaita notion vanished,
The distinctions of place, time and object disappeared;
The soul assumed the universal form.

In this manner the true nature of universe is discovered beyond the frontiers of the average sensual world.

*** *** ***

Spiritual concepts can either be superstitions or eternal truths; the notion of unworldliness can either be fanatical or mystical; but the bliss of having such a faith is undoubtedly one of the rare accomplishments. The philosophy of the saints did testify that the spiritual concepts they preached did not create any imbalance in the existing social harmony. Their philosophy contained Bhakti with the eternal ethical principles such as purity, self-control, non-violence, compassion, forgiveness and peace. It preserved unity of culture during the most critical periods of our history. To the saints it certainly offered an exalted state of mind and joy in wisdom.

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22. निद्रेसी आसन उत्तम पाषाण ।
वरी आवरण आकाशाचे ।
तेथे काय करणे कवणाची आस ।
वाया होय नाश आयुष्याचा ॥

Tukaram saw in his religion not merely a salvation for himself, but redemption for the whole mankind. He made God central to his thought, yet he did not lose his interest in social life. His was a lofty theism that contained the entire world-view. Similarly, there does not appear to be any conflict between tradition and individuality in his poetry. Tukaram is the only saint in whom we find an intense personal religion; but he had a philosophy, and had behind him the systems of the Geeta, which he had interpreted in his *Mantra-Geeta;* he had embraced the system of the Chaitanyas; and he was also the most active exponent of the *Varkari* philosophy.

There is a great deal of protestant spirit in him. He was by nature opposed to several elements in Hinduism which made it impossible for the true believer to have any access to spiritual attainment. Tukaram was never a supreme believer in the medieval Hindu ideas nor was he feudal in his attitude. It does not appear that he urged Hinduism as an ideal life for all. On the other hand, he was often critical of much that went with Hinduism.

Tukaram's life proves that human and divine spheres are interpenetrable. He rose from scepticism to a strong critical sense. After experiencing his own personal purification, he was beset by the idea of purifying the whole mankind. His emphasis on personal existence and subjectivity led him to new concerns about man's freedom and personal responsibility. It was the age when people suffered not only from war, famine and ruin, but from the inner problems which were probably more terrible; and renunciation, *sanyas* and complete surrender to brahmanical imposture were the only possible ways of Moksha. In such an age Tukaram revitalized the sphere of Bhakti and openly preached social equality, rejected the civilization in which he found himself and demanded a radical alteration in the concepts which had been narrowly defined by orthodox pundits. For example :

Compassion means good feeling towards all living things,
And also the destruction of the evil-doers.[23]

23. दया तिचे नाव भूतांचे पाळण ।
आणिक निर्दळण कंटकांचे ॥

As a social reformer, he asserted over and over again that his listeners should withdraw from worldly evils and purify their minds. He was a moral connoisseur, emphasizing clean conduct in action. As he says:

The pure heart does not need any advice.

*** ***

Advice should be according to merit, yet
The burden should not exceed the capacity to carry.

A practical-minded saint, he pursued the ethical values with great sincerity:

One who earns wealth by good means,
And spends it dispassionately,
He will have a good after-life.

Though life was sorrowful, his advice was: "*We should not bear the burden of fear.*" He defined this world as "*merely a halting-place during our journey.*"

Men should conquer lust, condemn pride and violence, welcome sacrifice; they should acquire virtues in order to protect themselves from evil forces. Men should be industrious. As an example, he quotes:

The land may be an inherited gift,
It would not yield crop on its own.

People should remain aloof from vicious influences such as woman and money. In his practical code of conduct ethics and action, Bhakti and Karma, this-worldliness and other-worldiness, character and faith, compassion for the living and good behaviour—are rigorously bound together. He exploited religious values in order to bring a change in the age-old habits of pessimism and self-complacency. He exhorts:

Adopt some change in your thinking,
This human life is not going to be repeated.[24]

Thus he abolishes the dichotomy between faith and reason in a single couplet. In several such *abhangs* he assails vices common in his day.

*** *** ***

As a Bhakta he had discovered that the root of all sorrow is *dvaita,* dualism, a principle that favoured discrimination. The same principle had created social disparity manifested in the age-old caste system. So Tukaram vehemently attacked the caste system with all its evils. He exploded the myth of the purity of Brahmans which was the basis of the hierarchical four-fold system. He preached that reading scriptures, fulfilling caste obligations, respecting the religious authorities, punishing the body with cruel and senseless privations — all were useless for salvation. Any hierarchy should be based on individual merit.

He had himself felt the tortures of being born in a low caste. His birth had come in the way of his spiritual attainment. He repeatedly records :

I am of low caste, of low intelligence, helpless, and poor,
Still Vitthal accepted me.

*** ***

I was born as a Shudra,
Thus was kept away from all hypocrisy;
I have no claim to study of scriptures,
I am helpless in every way as I am a low caste.

In a tone which is at once ironic and pathetic, he puts forward his own helplessness in this regard. About Brahmans who observe untouchability, he says :

---

24. बुद्धीचा पालट धरा रे काही ।
मागुता हा नाही मनुष्यदेह ॥

A Brahman who gets angry after touching a Mahar is not a Brahman,
Suicide is the only expiation for such a Brahman.

About the man of low caste who is *Vaishnav* (a devotee of Vishnu), he says :

An untouchable's mother be blessed, if he is a devotee of Vishnu,
His lineage is pure on both sides,
Though of low caste, he is verily a Brahman.

He upheld the dictum that nothing was unclean that was created by God. By emphasizing the importance of individual purity he strove to eradicate the complex about castes from the minds of his devotees. If all become clean and pure in practice as well as in thought, the 'capital' of purity would be equitably disseminated.

The Brahmans humiliated even the men of extraordinary intelligence who were born in the low castes. In turn, this tendency propagated pessimistic view of life in the people. Tukaram had to put forth an angry defence for the great men of India who were born in low castes :

Holy is the family, holy is the country, where servants of God are born,
Is there any man who was purified by the pride of caste ? —Let me know.
The untouchable castes have crossed Samsar by means of Bhakti,
And even the Puranas sing their praise;
. . . . Gora, the potter; Ravidas, the cobbler;
Kabir, the Momin; Latif, the Musalman; Sena, the barber — were all devotees of Vishnu.
Kanhopatra, the Carver, Chokha Mela and Vanka were Mahars;

Jani, the maid-servant of Namadev — how great was her faith that Vitthal would eat with her !

Caste does not exist for the devotees of Vishnu,
This is the judgement of the Vedas.

On the other hand what did the 'high-born' do ?

The Brahmans have given up their duties,
They have become great liars.

*** ***

He regularly haggles with a Mang woman.[25]

*** ***

They occupy high positions and unjustly harass others.

*** ***

They are the slaves of the wretched rulers,
And are beaten for any mistakes.

*** ***

He sells holy rites such as bath, worship and rosary.

*** ***

The worst of all trades is the trade of money-lending,
Yet it is done by Brahmans in this evil age.

In several such poems he condemned the paraphernalia of brahmanism : notions of high birth, blind beliefs, chanting of the Vedas, orthodox standards, ritualism, verbalism and bookish learning. He recognized only individual morality, because it was by the core of individual morality that a man was truly tested, he said.

Similarly, he did not spare the common people and bitterly satirized their vices. He condemned money-lenders, quack saints, Gurus, Sanyasis, Bairagis, Naths, Malangs, Jangams, Fakirs and such other parasites of the already poor famished society; for his heart was always weighed down under the load of pity for

---

25. Refers to the superstition among Brahmans that sexual intercourse with a Mang woman during the period of eclipse makes one a millionaire.

the common man. The kind heart is always felt even in the bitterest satires. Tukaram was the saint who came closest to the common man's concerns. For example, he defined a holy man in the following words :

He is the true saint who embraces the oppressed and unfortunate;
God is found with him.

*** ***

Soft as butter within and without :
Such is the nature of a good man.

And about parasites he has the following abusive scorching words :

With only physical sanyas he did not shed the bonds of desire,
Getting his head shaved, superficially,
He could not have intrinsic devotion;
Despite the intensive suppression of the senses,
Egoism roars inside;
Such a man should be avoided,
The whole adornment is false,
Tuka says, such sanyas is good for cheating people.

Thus, embracing objects of senses was no better than rejecting them; neither action brings man closer to reality. They lead to each other, according to Tukaram :

Let this Guru-hood be condemned,
Let this discipleship also be condemned,
Tuka says, such Guru and disciple,
Both go to hell.

His invective was sharp against all sectarians because their living was sadistic and superficial. Let no mercy be shown to such men :

What have you done by going to the holy place,
Except for washing your skin outwardly ?

and,

Tuka says, everything will be a waste,
Without experience.

For the professional drones he has more vulgar abuses, such as :

Spit on his face;

or,

Begging-bowl is shameful,
Such a livlng be condemned.

For his own *Varkari Kirtankars* he laid down several prescriptions, such as :

Do not accept food, where you sing kirtan,
Tuka says, those who accept and offer money,
Both go to hell.

He condemned the trivial Gods and Goddesses of the Hindus in the same vulgar vein :

He is the fool who calls them Gods !

Even with all this bitterness and vulgarism, his social criticism did not lead to intolerance and vindictiveness, because his 'sharp answers' were equally critical of all social vices; and he was never partisan in his attitude. As he declares :

I have come to illumine your paths,
And to judge the right and the wrong.

*** ***

Let us help each other,
And march all on the right path.

It was a great achievement to explode the hypocrisy and bigotism of all sects. As a thorough proletarian, he preached his

thoughts in a proletarian language, which made him more effective. The confident tone of his expression as regards the role of a saint could be seen in the following *abhang* :

We, the servants of God, are softer than wax,
Yet we are harder than the thunderbolt;
When pleased, we would give away the cloth on our arse,
But we would lodge a stick on the head of a rogue;
We may be more affectionate than parents,
But can sabotage more than enemies do;
When compared with us,
What is nectar's sweetness or poison's bitterness ?

Tuka says, we are all sweet,
We satisfy everybody's craving as is demanded of us.[26]

*** *** ***

Though Tukaram was not deeply concerned with the political weather of his time, and was never actively involved in it, he did encourage the spirit of nationalism, embodied in Shivaji's revolt which originated in his own district. In several *abhangs* he reacts sharply to the pious thinking that had made people inactive. He taught active resistance to check evil forces. He states : *Adopt evil to counter evil.*

Similar expressions serve as evidence that he did stimulate active resistance among the people. A series of his poems called

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26. मऊ मेणाहून आम्ही विष्णुदास ।
कठीण वज्रास भेदू ऐसे ॥
भले तरी देऊ गांडीची लंगोटी ।
नाठ्याळाचे काठी देऊ माथा ॥
मायबापाहुनी बहु मायावंत ।
करू घातपात शत्रूहुनी ॥
अमृत ते काय गोड आम्हापुढे ।
विष ते बापुडे कडू किती ॥
तुका म्हणे आम्ही अवघेचि गोड ।
ज्याचे पुरे कोड त्याचेपरी ।

Paik abhangs (Verses for the Soldier) is directly addressed to the villagers about the necessity of loyalty and sacrifice. He has recorded with great distress his reaction to the atrocities and massacres, possibly at the hands of Shivaji's enemies :

I cannot bear seeing it,
Such is this disaster ...
My heart grieves over their affliction,
Tuka says, you have humiliated my devotion,
God, to be alive is a disgrace.

The invasions and the plight of the people disturbed him deeply. He preached his people on how to preserve their identity, how to unite and work for the common cause; he encouraged warlike spirit and the necessity of self-sacrifice for the king, who could be Shivaji himself :

Soldier is the one who guards his people,
Stands by the family.
And uproots the enemies.

*** ***

The Soldier should sacrifice his life,
When the country is in distress.

*** ***

When bullets and arrows and shells shower incessantly in a battle,

He should advance towards the front;
This act will glorify him.

CONCLUSION

FOR over three centuries Tukaram has exerted profound influence over the religious and social thinking of the Marathi people and has brought Bhakti close to the inhabitants of distant villages. The overwhelming influence of his works can hardly be overestimated. In almost every generation, his poems have been widely read, copied and sung. The influence has not been confined to religious circles and illiterate devotees, but has spread to all types of prose and poetry down the centuries; it covers much of the great poetry written after him. Almost all the major poets in Marathi have expressed their debt to Tukaram; and it is difficult to find a poet who has not been influenced by his poetic idiom.

His inward conflicts, so intensely personal and mystical in character, were expressed in the startling imagery drawn from common life. The dramatic tone of his emotions finds appropriate speech rhythms in the flexible *abhang* pattern. A typical Tukaram abhang has four or five lines of eight and eight or six and six beats each, with a caesura in the middle of the line. Villagers sing his sweet songs every morning and evening. Scholars quote his pointed sayings to support their arguments. Orators use his lines to heighten the effect of their rhetoric. Politicians quote his lines to charm the peasantry. Several Marathi novels and plays derive their titles from Tukaram's idioms. Indeed, the Marathi language would have been poor

without his influence. He has given to every type of man the perfect expression to suit his own sentiment.

The secret of his tremendous appeal lies in the use of the colloquial idiom. As we know him he was a practical man, a father of six children, the head of a joint family; he had married his daughters in the traditional manner to men of his own community. His life was closest to common man's life. Though he often makes use of traditional Sanskrit similes and metaphors, he carefully chooses simple native words to construct an original phrase. There is a tendency to brevity. The exposition of the path of Bhakti is done in simple, direct verse with an abundance of earthly metaphors and similes. This makes even the most illiterate person feel involved in his poetry, to find an echo of his own experiences. All his readers become participants in his rich world while reading him.

He was fully conscious of the medium he was handling :

We possess the wealth of words,
With weapons of words we will fight;
Words are the breath of our life,
We will distribute the wealth of words among the people;
Tuka says, look ! the meaning of the Word is God,
With the Word we will extol and worship.

There is a very wide field of illustrations (*drishtanta*) that he draws from a variety of common life; the maturity of his emotional and religious life is felt in the perfect correspondences. The images are highly individualized products of his own thinking :

Like the Kunbis *who leave the body uncremated until the sowing is done,*
You have rushed to me.

***　　　***

As the married girl, who, while leaving for her in-laws' house,
Wistfully casts her glances backward;

Even so my heart pines for you, O God !
As a child that misses its mother looks about, uneasy,
Or as a fish out of water—
Such are the agonies of Tuka.[27]

*** ***

Like a Baniya who sits all night before a lamp,
When his accounts do not tally...

*** ***

God, you debtor,
You have taken the loan of Bhakti from me,
And pawned your feet to me;
God, give me the interest of love,
And clear soon your account.

*** ***

As a mother listens to the good news of her son,
So should be the state of my mind singing,
And listening to the praise of God.

*** ***

The big trees blossom in hot summer,
Who waters them ?

*** ***

Like a traveller who comes for a night's halt,
And departs at dawn ...

It is no wonder that hundreds of his utterances received the status of proverbs in Marathi, as they combine movements of great lyrical beauty with stark realism underlying them. The rustic and vivid images catch the popular fancy, speaking straight to the heart. For example:

What can be done to the mosquito ?
It is in its nature to bother us.

---

27. कन्या सासुरासि जाये मागे परतोनी पाहे ।
तैसे झाले माझ्या जीवा केव्हा भेटसी केशवा ॥
चुकलिया माये बाळ हुरूहुरू पाहे ।
जीवनावेगळी मासोळी तैसा तुका तळमळी ॥

The footwear is good only to the foot.

*** ***

To think of happiness,
In a bug-infested bed.

*** ***

By becoming an ant, one can eat sugar...
Tuka says, be small to get things dear to you.

*** ***

Low position is better, O God,
It makes one's rivals ineffective;
When a great flood sweeps away big trees,
Small reeds survive.[28]

Such expressions range from the homely passions to the highest religious emotions, and their capacity for direct statement in verse is remarkable. They reveal a continual discovery of fascinating rhythm in the registers of ordinary speech. For example :

How does a fish sleep in water ?
One would know it only by getting born in its species.[29]

One of the common motifs of his imagery is the merit of sincerity : his *abhangs* are frequented by such images as the chisel and the idol, war and bravery, the guard and his loyalty, gold and its purity, sandalwood and its genuineness, measure and the honest trade. The frequency of these images in his poetry reveals his primal concern with sincerity, self-purification and severe self-struggle.[30] For Tukaram, life was :

A day-and-night battle, fought within and without,
Both in the world and in the mind.[31]

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28. नीचपण बरें देवा न चले कोणाचाही दावा ।
महापुरे झाडे जाती तेथे लव्हाळे राहती ।।
29. पाण्यातील मासा झोप घेई कैसा ।
जावे त्याच्या वंशा तेव्हा कळे ।।
30. V. B. Kolte : *Tukaramache Abhang*, page 62.
31. रात्रंदिन आम्हा युद्धाचा प्रसंग ।
अंतर्बाह्य जग आणि मन ।।

He compared himself to a measure :

Like a measure, I wore myself out, through constant use,
Let this unrewarding dignity be condemned.[32]

The following *abhang* deals with the courage of an adulteress, which, according to Tukaram, is exemplary :

A wife, seeking the pleasures of a paramour,
Has to risk her life,
And having once set fire to her domestic life,
She must not look back upon it;
Tuka says, one should be as bold as her.

In the context of his time, the admiration of such a courageous act would look 'anti-religious'. But all this Tukaram did with great humility. He would say,

How can an abject person like me,
Know the subtleties of meaning ?
I speak out,
What Viṭṭhal bids me speak.

His advice to writers was :

Tuka says, speak only that which meets the meaning,
Or else, do not speak.

His was an all-pervasive poetic sentiment combined with sharp intelligence. There are lyrics in which the rhythm itself expresses the emotion; their rhyme, alliteration and assonance—all are made to serve an expressive purpose. As in :

Waiting,
My eyes get weary,
When will you show your feet,
To my eyes ?[33]

---

32. मोजुनी झिजलो मापाचिये परी ।
जाळावी हे थोरी लाभाविण ।।
33. वाटुली पाहाता सिणले डोळुले ।
दाविसी पाउले कैं वो डोळां ।।

Niḷoba, a contemporary poet, sang Tukaram's praise, summing up his greatness in these lines :

You renounced life's affairs by enjoying them all,
You offered the bodily senses to the fire of Repentance,
You revealed the faith in Dispassion,
You chose your peace, by losing your ego and affection;
Victory to you, O Guru Tukaram, the giver,
You are the saviour of all and dear kinsman.

You verily raised the magnitude of Bhakti,
And disclosed the treasure of Non-attachment,
You offered the remedy of universal redemption,
You dissolved the doubts of the revilers and the wicked;
Victory to you, O Guru Tukaram, the giver,
You are the saviour of all and dear kinsman.

Before the rift between religion and culture occurred, the great minds were preoccupied with metaphysical problems. Tukarm was one such vigorously creative mind. The act of living was his prime concern. Much as he was tormented by the affairs of life, he rejoiced in the creative force, and has been able to convince his readers down three centuries that the world is meaningful.

As for himself, he obliterated the borders between the earthly and divine life, and transcended time; so he blissfully sang,

We have built a house in nothingness,
Our eternal stay is in the formless;
We have become one with the non-illusion,
We are the recipients of continual unity,

Tuka says, now there is no ego left,
I have become one with that which is perennially pure.

GLOSSARY

Abhang A hymn, a lyrical poem meant to be sung, written in a particular metrical form which has a folk origin.

Advaita A doctrine of the identity of the human soul and the divine essence, non-duality.

Avaidika One who does not accept the authority of the Vedas.

Bhajan (i) A choral service in which all present take part.
(ii) A short devotional poem usually in praise of a deity.

Bhakta A devotee, a worshipper, especially who follows the Bhakti Marga.

Bhakti Personal relation to God, predominantly emotional in character. It is an attitude of the devotee towards God emphasizing moral purity and loving faith. The Bhakti Marga is the way to salvation through such a devotion in contrast to Dhnyana Marga, Way of knowledge and Karma Marga, Way of deeds.

Dvaita Duality, the doctrine of the duality of the deity and the universe, of the human soul and the divine essence.

Ekadashi A fasting vow, the eleventh day of each fortnight of the Hindu calendar.

Harikatha See *Kirtan*

Kirtan A gathering of devotees in which a theme is expounded with supporting verses and illustrations from Hindu epics, scriptures and lives of great men to educate the audience; also called *Harikatha*.

Kirtankar A professional who performs a *Kirtan* as a religious leader.

Kunbi An agriculturist; in the past, a synonym of all Maratha Castes.

Mahanubhav A monastic cult founded by Chakradhar, extremely influential in the thirteenth century. It disregarded the Vedas, attacked Brahmanism, did not recognise any deity except Krishna, and offered equality to women and Shudras. The cult is quite active even today. The Mahanubhav writers were the first to enrich Marathi prose and poetry, and thus initiated the process of vernacularization and revolt against Sanskrit.

Mahar An untouchable community; its member.

Mang An untouchable community; its member.

Nath A yogic cult of the devotees of Shiv, reputed for their use of occult formulas.

Patil The chief administrative officer of a village.

Samadhi (i) Self-immolation usually in a yogic trance.
(ii) A yogic state of mind in deep meditation.

Samsar Affairs of life with its cares and troubles, mundane existence, the world, human life.

Sanyas Asceticism, casting off all worldly possessions and carnal desires.

Shudra The serving castes among the Hindus, the fourth division of *varnas*.

Varkari (i) Sect : founded in the thirteenth century by Namadev and Dhnyanadev as a reaction to extreme

Brahman orthodoxy; the most popular religious sect in Maharashtra and Karnataka until today. Worshipping *Vitthal* of Pandharpur on the banks of the river Chandrabhaga, bringing about religious and social reformation, it produced great poetry in Marathi up to the seventeenth century.

(ii) Person : A devout worshipper of *Vitthal*, who observes certain prohibitions like wine and flesh, and undertakes regular pilgrimage to Pandharpur.

Vitthal The idol of the God at Pandharpur. The origin of this God is unknown, though he is believed to be the Incarnation of Vishnu.

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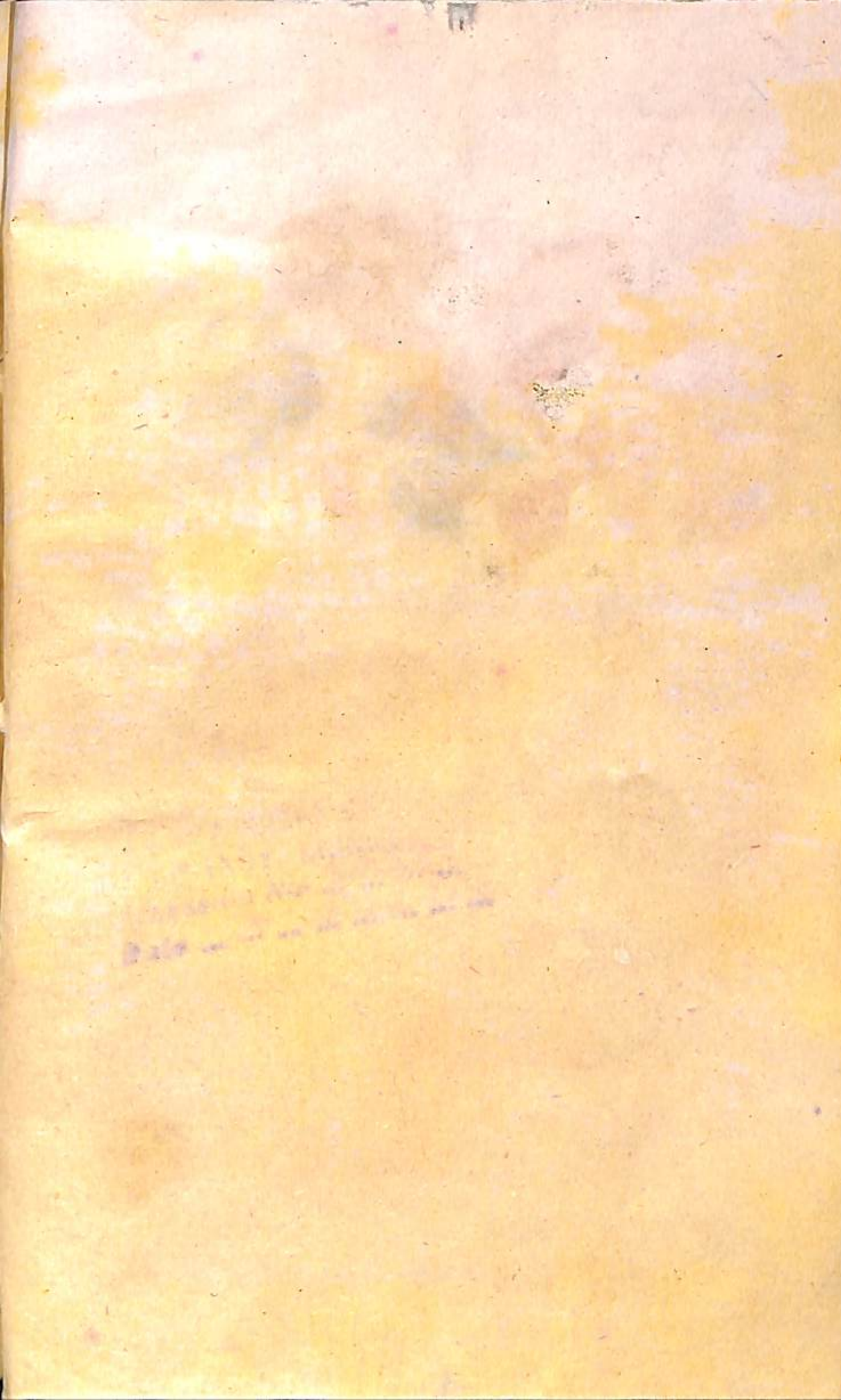
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